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The Necken



An Original Play
In Two Acts by
Elizabeth G. Crane



THE NECKEN

A Play in Two Acts

BY

ELIZABETH G. CRANE

NEW YORK

1913

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CHARACTERS.

SVEN, a farmer.....	Conrad Cantzen
BRITA, his wife	Kate Mayhew
TOA, their daughter	Alice Newell
INGA, head-maid	Alberta Gallatin
SIGURD	Ernest Weir
JAN, the Necken	Laurence Eyre
LENNART	William H. Post
ASTRID, a maid	Edith Yeager
A MONK	George C. Currie
TORVALD, an old man.....	George Cameron
SVANHILD, an old woman	Lettie Ford
FIRST MAID	Emily V. Lawshé
SECOND MAID	Isabel Calder
VILLAGE YOUTH	Marion Earnshaw
CHILD	Emmett Lawshé

As presented by the Sydney Rosenfeld Production Co.,
under the auspices of the National Federation of Theatre
Clubs, at the Lyceum Theatre (Daniel Frohman, Man-
ager), New York, April 15, 1913.



THE NECKEN

ACT .I.

SCENE I.

SCENE: In Sweden. A large, low farmhouse kitchen, with two windows at the back, through which is seen a snowy wood at dusk. At one end is the house door, at the other end two doors lead into bedrooms, etc. In the middle of the kitchen stands a long table. In one corner there is a small Christmas-tree decorated. A fire burns on the wide hearth, which fills one corner of the room, and several pots hang from the chimney hooks above it, or stand on the iron slab itself. INGA is busy with preparations for supper.

TIME: Christmas eve during the first two acts. Last act takes place on the first of May.

INGA.

[*Goes to the outer door and calls.*]

Lennart! Ho! Lennart! Did you ever see
His like? To one spot rooted like a tree!
Quick, man, fetch me some rushes; for the floor
Is not half covered yet. Be quick! there's more
Waits here the doing. Come, for once make haste!
'Tis almost supper time. I've none to waste!

THE NECKEN.

[*She comes back into the room, and begins to set the table for supper, humming to herself. BRITA enters through one of the doors at the back.*]

BRITA.

Is the Yule broth prepared?

INGA.

With her own hands
Did little Toa make it; there it stands;
Done to a turn in half an hour 'twill be.

BRITA.

The holy candles of the Trinity?

INGA.

Set in their three-fold candlestick, which bright
I've burnished till it shines like silver quite.

BRITA.

Where is your master?

INGA.

[*Pointing to the other door at the back.*]

Why he sits within,
And talks with the good father. 'Tis a sin
The old man should have walked so far to-day
To beg a Yuletide alms! For surely they
Have younger men to send from door to door.
I asked him, would he take a sup before
He left; a bit of broth, a glass of mead;
He would not. Oh, he is a saint indeed,
If there be any such!

THE NECKEN.

BRITA.

Aye, that is so!

A holy man he is; but I must go
Put on my Sunday gown. Look to the fire,
Till I send Toa, then you may attire
Yourself, eh? for poor Lennart? Spick and span
In your new bodice?

INGA.

Not for any man!

[Exit BRITA. INGA continues setting table, singing an old
Christmas carol.]

"As the shepherds kept watch o'er their flocks, they heard
In the pastures where they were lying,
Sudden at midnight, the angel's word,
While the glory of God they were spying:
Great joy and peace I bring to——" [Enter LENNART
with a bundle of rushes, which he begins to strew over
the floor.]

[Continues.] Wipe your shoes
Upon the door-mat, stupid, or you lose
Your share of hot Yule porridge. [Begins to sing carol
again.]

"Born to-day
Great joy to all He's bringing
Who is the Lord of David's line,
The glorious light arising."—Did I say
You should criss-cross the rushes in that way,
To make us stumble every step we take?
If you have brains, use them, for pity's sake. [Sings carol.]
"With a loud voice then did the heavenly host
Begin with the angel a-singing:

THE NECKEN.

Peace be on earth, good-will——”

—What have you done?

The Lord be praised, I am not such an one!
Much would I give to look inside your head;
But, as I cannot, tell me now, instead—
For 'tis a thing I've often wished to know—
How does it feel to be so very slow?
If I were you——

LENNART.

Oh, leave a man in peace!
You women chatter, chatter, without cease!
You rustle, bustle, hustle, here and there,
And when all's said and done——

INGA.

The tree—take care!

LENNART.

Beshrew me, if in spite of noise and rout
I know what all the pother is about!

INGA.

You call us idle, then?
But that's the way of men!
We boil and brew,
And bake and stew,
We wash and scrub,
And clean and rub,
We sweep and churn,
Old clothes we turn
To look like new;

THE NECKEN.

We patch and sew,
But there's one thing we cannot mend:
Your manners, and may heaven send
You better ones!

LENNART.

My faith, we too
Have somewhat on the earth to do!
To mow the field, although I wot,
To you it seems an easy lot,
To bind the sheaves, and make the hay,
To plough and harrow all the day,
To weed, to sow, to thresh, to reap,
To feed the cattle, shear the sheep,
Fetch water, chop the wood, dig drains,
And then be scolded for our pains;
By nightfall we have earned our rest.

INGA.

Well, well, I know you do your best.

LENNART.

Aye, all of us but one; for not a thing
That fellow does, whom master hired last spring.

INGA.

The handsome youth?

LENNART.

Humph! I've no use for such!
My word upon it, he's not good for much!
Well thatched, if there be emptiness instead
Of mother-wit therein, what use is it

THE NECKEN.

To be so long of limb, and short of wit?
I've watched him since he bargained for the place,
And—like him not—for all his woman's face.

INGA.

What has he done?

LENNART.

Why, nothing; that is just
The trouble. Not his bread, nor even its crust,
He earns. The hay-mows rotting in the rain
He leaves, and with the tare weeds up the grain.
Oft have I seen him stand an hour and stare
At some pestiferous weed, and let the share
Sleep in the half-turned furrow; odder still—
Believe or disbelieve it, as you will—
Last night when with my lantern late the round
I went of barn and stable, there I found
He'd fed the cows their supper, each and all,
But tied them tail-end-foremost in the stall.

INGA.

[*Laughing.*] If that's the worst!

LENNART.

Eh! that's enough, I think,
To drive an honest man like me to drink!
No, no, there's more in it than meets the sight!

INGA.

I feel, I know not why, all is not right.
A gentle carle he seems, and yet I fear

THE NECKEN.

To be alone with him; he is so queer!
Why does he mutter to himself, and croon
Weird melodies beneath the waning moon?
And why his head—'tis strange—he never bares
Without, within, the house, but ever wears
That peaked cap, pulled down to shade his brows?
And have you marked, then—you who talk of cows—
How he, when yonder holy man is here,
To every word he utters seems all ear,
And sits with drooping head, as though he felt
A sorrow, which the hardest heart would melt
With pity, overbrim the coldest eye?

LENNART.

The saints be praised that I have kept mine dry!
Where are his own? Cast down; I cannot brook
A young man so ashamed he dare not look
His fellows in the face. [*With lowered voice.*]

Crime heavy loads

His weary conscience, and his presence bodes
No good to us. Perchance some wicked plan
He cloaks in pious sorrow. This strange man
Will burn the roof above us, or, God wot,
Bewitch, rob, murder us; I know not what!
Or steal some maiden's love: in woman's heart
Will pity take the very devil's part.
Perhaps, already he——

INGA.

[*As TOA and monk enter from side-door.*] For shame!

LENNART.

Has——

THE NECKEN.

INGA.

Hush!

This is for Tomte* [*Holding up small dish.*]

Take it to the bush

Beside the great barn door; nor look around

When you have placed it there upon the ground,

But quickly walk away.

TOA.

[*Laughing.*]

And do not glance

Back o'er your shoulder, should you even chance

To hear a little laugh, or whisper brief,

Light as the flutter of a withered leaf;

'Tis the kind spirit of the house.

INGA.

[*Looking at LENNART.*] He knows

A thing or two. Uneasily he goes

All night now to and fro; in kitchen, bin,

And larder rattles: all's not well!

[*Exit LENNART with the dish—exit INGA.*]

MONK

A sin

These superstitions are, idolatrous!

For pagans fit, not Christians, child, like us.

We know one, only Spirit, who is love;

To Him all spirits in the heavens above,

Or earth beneath, are subject: [*Enter JAN quietly by the house-door, hardly visible at that dusky end of the room.*]

*Tomte: the Swedish house-spirit for whom a dish of food is always placed on Christmas eve.

THE NECKEN.

Good and ill

In love or hate must carry out his will.

And now goodnight! May Yuletide joy and peace

Brood o'er this house, and blessedly release

Each soul from sin! [*He goes toward door and comes face to face with JAN, who draws back and looks long and earnestly upon him. Monk is struck by his appearance, raises his hand in act of blessing, and says, while the other bows his head:*]

Oh, take my blessing too!

This holy feast, son, bring goodwill to you;

Bring, if there's sorrow heaving in your breast,

Peace to its troubled waters! Be at rest!

[*Exit MONK by house-door. INGA after a few words with TOA goes out at side-door. TOA continues the preparations for supper, standing by the fire, while JAN goes over to a crucifix hanging on the wall, and stands gazing at it, lost in thought. There is no light but that of the fire in the room; the dusk darkening into night without the windows.*]

TOA.

[*Looks toward JAN, hesitates, makes a movement toward him, once, twice, and at last goes up to him and touches him gently on the shoulder. He starts, and turns toward her.*]

I cannot bear to see you sorrowful

While we rejoice, that on this blessed night

He, whose dear image here you gaze upon,

Was born to save mankind.

THE NECKEN.

JAN.

[*Pointing to crucifix.*] Who slew him thus!
But does it trouble you that I am sad?

TOA.

You are not like the rest; you do not go
To dance or drinking-bout, but sit at home,
And all your pleasure in your fiddle place.

JAN.

[*Smiling as he looks in her face.*] Not all.

TOA.

In something else you more delight
Than in sweet music?

JAN.

Toa, I have given
The richest treasure that my poor life owns—
That music—to your keeping.

TOA.

Be assured
I guard it well, for in my oaken chest,
Soft in my lambskin folds, your fiddle sleeps.
I would that I might learn to play upon it!

JAN.

[*Taking her hand impetuously.*]
Could I endure this little hand of yours
Upon my heart-strings! Child—I fear—I fear
It is too late; already you have touched them!

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

[*Eagerly.*] No, trust me, no!

JAN.

Strange is the violin!

And subject to that mighty law, which makes
High beauty from the soil of sorrow spring,
For him alone who suffers will it sing.
But you, whose sunny calm of youth as yet
Was never ruffled, swept by the wild winds
Of fear and grief, you cannot have the power,
The awful power—and heaven forbid you should!—
To loose the spirit chained, and send it forth
Along the sounding strings. Ha, how they tremble,
Like feathered grass low-bending, while that breath,
Mysterious, passes over them and on
To sway the souls of men!

TOA.

One note, but one,

I hear ring through the music of your speech:
You suffer! Ah, I would not have you suffer;
No, not for all the greatness in such grief!
For you are kind withal; of gentle word,
And noble act—and so—for you—because—
I like you—through my happiness to-night
Throbs here [*putting her hand to her heart*] a pity, which
is almost pain.

JAN.

Pain! Pain, for me! The plummet of your pity
Can never sound the deep on deep that rolls

THE NECKEN.

Above my head, who am forever doomed
To rot among the wrecks of living things.
But from your pain I, strangely cruel, suck
Quick joy, which thrills along my sluggish veins
A sudden tide of life. For me you suffer?
For me, who creeping like a wounded thing
Beneath the wing of your soft woman's presence,
Found there safe shelter from hard, human eyes,
Which pried into my hurt, and mocked my grief?
For me, you suffer! Toa, whose dear name
Each night in reverence I dare to breathe
Instead of prayer to heaven! Whose low voice
Like mighty music moves me, aye, it shakes
The center of my being! Did you say,
"You liked me?" Toa, there's a word of fire
Glow on my tongue—if I dared flame it forth
Instead of your cold "like," to kindle you
And then consume you in its burning sweetness,
As night and day I am consumed, yet die not:
But no, I cannot—must not——

TOA.

[*Leaning toward him.*] Whisper it;
For if perchance it be the word my heart
Has taught me—then——

JAN.

My Toa, tempt me not!
Let not your pity torture me with hope!
Curse-bound both hand and foot, shall I be bold
To lift my longing eyes to such as you?
Be harsh with me! Oh, punish me with scorn;

THE NECKEN.

And I will thank you for the gracious gift,
But oh, your kindness, like the fiery fumes
Of a strong wine, heats, whirling, my weak brain—
Beware lest I grow drunken with it!

TOA.

Yet

If I confessed what maiden must not speak;
Must barely think, locked in the cloistered cell
Of her own breast, her hot cheeks dyed with blushes,
As mine are now—if I confessed to you
What I have never said to any man—
I love you——

JAN.

Toa, of all mortal maids

The sweetest, do I dream, or waking hear
Your voice? “I love you!” with those magic words
You open wide the gates of heaven itself,
And with the blessèd light and warmth of Yule
Flood all my dark! Oh, joy! Oh, rapture! Love,
I’d hear once more, if only in my dream,
Those words from your dear mouth drop, pearl by pearl,
Into my listening heart!

TOA.

And mine shall brave

These burning blushes, Jan, for it is yours
Through good and ill. Oh, therefore, share with me
This grief mysterious, which oppresses you.
I’ll cherish it and hold it dearer far
Than all my joys; and this I surely know,
That if, like one of our tall mountain peaks,
It overhang the valley of your life,

THE NECKEN.

And with its frown obscure your sun at morn,
At noontide and at night, yet never can
The noble heart be fettered by a curse!
Then tell me——

JAN.

No!

TOA.

Pray!

JAN.

Let me snatch this night
From sorrow past and sorrow that's to come!
Blot all things from my memory but love.
Who knows but God will end all else to-night;
And we who gallop through these rushing hours
On our winged happiness, high over earth,
As if we rode the constellation called
By men: "the flying horse"; we two, my star
Whose glory pales not in that dreadful dawn
Of judgment, smiling at my breast, and I
Will at the crack of doom through smoke and flame,
Rapt in the heaven of each other's eyes,
Leap down the vast abyss, and 'mid the thunder
Of falling worlds be swallowed up for aye!
You tremble, you turn pale?

TOA.

Hush; someone comes!

THE NECKEN.

JAN.

[*Quickly kissing her hand.*]

Then will I take this fair Yule gift from you;
Nay, then, my lips shall borrow and repay
A thousand-fold, I swear, when next we meet:
When shall it be? To-night?

TOA.

Perhaps.

JAN.

Soon, soon!

TOA.

[*Enter INGA.*] I know not—after supper——

JAN.

[*Low.*] Sweetheart!

INGA.

[*Sniffing the air.*] Whew!

I smell a burning! Toa, have you let
The porridge burn?

JAN.

[*Low to TOA.*] No porridge, but my heart!

INGA.

Quick, Toa, it boils over! Careless child,
You should have watched it!

TOA.

[*Looking at the porridge.*] Not much harm is done, I hope!

THE NECKEN.

INGA.

[*Looking at JAN.*] Humph! who can tell!

TOA.

Oh, taste and see!

Such harm, that only you of all on earth
Can heal it.

INGA.

[*To JAN.*] You said?

JAN.

Nothing.

INGA.

[*To TOA.*] All is ready.

The holy candles light, and blow the horn

For supper. [*As TOA lights the candles and sets them on the table, JAN goes to the window and, while he stands there looking out, draws his hat down further over his face. TOA blows the birch horn at the house-door. Enter SVEN, BRITA, ASTRID, SIGURD and LENNART. All sit down to the table but TOA, who takes the dish of porridge to pass it.*]

SVEN.

If you are hungry as I am, fall to!

For good Yule suppers come but once a year.

Bring, Toa child, the porridge! [*TOA passes it to her father.*]

I remember

My first Yule porridge. In my father's house

My father's mother fed me on her knee.

THE NECKEN.

Ah, those were times! She was a woman cast
In larger mould of body and of mind
Than nature turns out now.

BRITA.

So was my mother.

How snugly would she stow us in the sledge,
My brothers and myself! Twelve miles or more
To mass we rode Yule morning.

SVEN.

Brita, you

Put me in mind; I had forgotten it;
The big sledge, Lennart, is it fit for use?
I promised the good father all should go
To early mass to-morrow. There will be
The old Yule hymns, well sung, the church alight
With many hundred candles; we shall see
The blessed Mother bending o'er her Babe,
While round the manger stand the large-eyed cows,
With sheep, and kneeling shepherds who adore;
All done in wax, as large and fine as life:
A sight that none must miss.

LENNART.

[To JAN.] Observe, the cows
Are to the manger tied; their heads where heads,
And tails where tails, should be.

[To SVEN.] The sledge stands ready
Down to the runners, which I made last week:
No thanks to him who should have looked to it.

[To INGA.] Mark how his melancholic humor grows!

THE NECKEN.

INGA.

[*To LENNART.*] And something else I've marked.
[*Whispers.*]

BRITA.

[*To TOA.*] A little burned
Your porridge is, my child.

ASTRID.

The saying runs:
The maid who burns Yule porridge has no luck
In love. [*TOA turns to the hearth to hide her confusion.*]

SIGURD.

What gives a man bad luck therein?

INGA.

Not one, but many foolish things he does.

SVEN.

Ha! Ha! The sharp-tongued Inga ever gets
The better of you all.

SIGURD.

My faith, to-night
She is as biting as the frost without;
And that is sharp enough; it, snapping, cracked
The great tree-boughs as I came through the wood,
As though some hungry dog did crunch a bone.

ASTRID.

There is no moon?

THE NECKEN.

SIGURD.

The night is thick with cloud.

BRITA.

But we shall have the candle's twinkling shine
From every cottage window on our way
To church.

TOA.

[*Passing the porridge to JAN.*]
Why is it, that these many months
You've never played for us, no, not a note?
Now let me fetch your fiddle from my chamber,
'And you shall play a good Yule psalm.

JAN.

[*With a reckless laugh.*] Ha! Ha!
Would not the De Profundis match my mood?
Believe me, Toa, if I played to-night
I'd whelm you in a rush of sounds so sweet,
A tumult of such passion and such pain,
You'd weep despite your gladness bitterly,
And, ravished, smile through all your falling tears;
For I should play upon your souls to-night,
And so—I will not.

TOA.

Ah!

JAN.

[*Low to TOA.*] For you alone
[*Aloud.*] I'll play to-night the March wind's melody,
When to his whistling fife in naked trees
He moves the sappy blood to mount and mount

THE NECKEN.

With dancing step, till in the topmost twig
It yearns forth into tender, blushing bud
Against the stormy breast of driving cloud;
That measure plaintive-sweet, but strong as death,
Which headlong to the river draws the brook,
The river to the sea, makes creeping tides
The whole earth round to follow the fair moon,
Points, true as needle to the polar star,
Each bird through unknown, airy wildernesses,
To his own mate, and lures reluctant spring,
Long loitering in the south, up day by day
To the tempestuous north, until, rough-armed,
He clasps her close, and in its melting sound
Dies the last maiden chill of her embrace.

TOA.

Hush! Hush!

INGA.

[*To LENNART.*] Seems he not happy?

LENNART.

[*To INGA.*] Strangely so!
I cannot make him out.

SVEN.

[*Rising, glass in hand.*] Fill up, my Toa,
With flowing mead the goblet! Children, drink
The first of toasts, that all our fathers drank
Upon this holy night: to the great Name
Above all other names in heaven or earth! [*He drinks,*
then passes the goblet to his wife and daughter, and so
on from hand to hand the goblet passes down the table,

THE NECKEN.

each drinking in turn until it reaches JAN, who grows very pale, hesitates, then tries to carry it with his trembling hand to his lips, once and twice. All eyes are gradually turned to him during his vain attempts. Whispers. and then a growing murmur among those at table.]

SIGURD.

He cannot drink the toast.

BRITA.

Look you, he grows

White as the snow without.

ASTRID.

And vainly strives

To lift the goblet with his shaking hand!

LENNART.

He has an evil conscience; from the first
I knew it!

INGA.

[*As they rise in confusion.*] This is wicked work of trolls!

ASTRID.

There's magic here!

VOICES.

Drink!

SVEN.

Fellow, bare the head,
And pledge the holy Name.

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

[*To SVEN.*] Oh, pity him!
He is not well, my father!

SVEN.

Well enough!

VOICES.

He cannot!

LENNART.

He blasphemes!

SVEN.

[*Striding up to him and snatching off his cap.*] So, off with it! [*There is a cry of surprise from all, as his long, green hair falls on his shoulders. He gazes imploringly up into SVEN's face.*] What have we here!

VOICES.

Look, look, his hair waves green
As long sea-grass!

SIGURD.

And do you mark his eyes;
No longer hid, they sparkle now, now grow
Green as deep water!

SVEN.

Vacant into mine
They stare; blank windows of a haunted house,
Where no man dwells, or dwelt, these many years.

ASTRID.

No, no, they change, for now like ice they glitter!

THE NECKEN.

INGA.

White as the wild leap of a waterfall!

LENNART.

'Twas not for nothing, I have long suspected,
He wore his ugly cap both night and day.

SVEN.

Now breaks a light upon me! Have I been
So blind these many months, who could not see
This was a Neck! Slipped from his murmuring brook
Below the meadow, when the day grew long
Last spring, and wrapped in purpling dusk he stole
With evening in the house. The muffler-cap,
My rusty, iron scythe, the only pay
He asked for one year's labor; proof on proof;
For iron is a mighty medicine
'Gainst magic, and its balm upon his breast
He fain would lay to cool his fever hot
And still his ache of anguish. Holy Mother,
Protect the house that harbored such a guest!

ASTRID.

I dare not meet his glance lest it bewitch me!

BRITA.

Oh, call those eyes unfathomed wells of woe,
That mirror inwardly some dreadful sight,
Which yet no man has ever gazed upon;
For never have I seen such dark despair

THE NECKEN.

Gloom any human face; and this is none.
Scarce I endure his mute, imploring look!

TOA.

[*Low.*] Ah, my poor heart, he could deceive thee thus!

JAN.

[*Groaning.*] Undone! Undone! Oh, miserable me!
Damned in the making; wherefore was I made?
Between the man and brute, flung out afar
Beyond redemption's pale! What hope for me,
Who cannot die nor live? Lost, lost forever!

LENNART.

We'll none of him!

SIGURD.

The kobold!

LENNART.

Thrust him out;

Away with him!

ASTRID.

Be sure, some evil follows

Hard at his heels!

JAN.

[*Rising.*] I go, nor will I ask
For mercy; well I know that you have none!
I know that man bears in his breast a stone
He calls his heart, cold, harder far than flint,
And I'll not break mine own in tears upon it.
Farewell! Yet there is one—to whom I'd say—
If I durst—pity me——

THE NECKEN.

[*He pauses, looking earnestly at TOA, takes a step toward her, but stops as she turns away.*] My child, that cut
Deep, deep to my heart's core! And so you follow
Your great, white Christ, who brought to-night goodwill
And peace to men—alone! I thank my gods
I am not His! Farewell!

SVEN.

Come, come, be off! [*Exit JAN.*]

LENNART.

[*Throwing the old scythe after him.*]
Here go your iron wages after you! [*To the rest.*]
Lest he should say of aught we cheated him.

ACT I.

SCENE II.

[*TOA's chamber at midnight. It is on the ground floor, simply furnished and lighted by two tallow candles. The bed stands in one corner, and in the center of the room is a large, carved chest, closed. A window in the background shows the snow-covered wood without. There is a door on the right. A small shrine, with a figure of the Virgin and a lighted taper before it, stands in the room. TOA is lying on the floor with her arms outstretched on the chest, and her head resting on them, as though exhausted by long weeping. Pause.*]

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

No more!

Lest I go mad and shriek my shameful wound
Through all the sleeping house! [*She sits up.*]
Oh, bitter tears, wash clean my memory
Of his polluting stain; leave naught of him
But this—by him forgotten. [*She opens the chest and
takes out the violin.*] Yet he said,
You were his heart-strings! Would to heaven you were,
That I might snap you, quivering in death,
With my own hands! No, let us rather weep
Together, for you were his sweetheart too.
Of some strange wood, with carvings quaint enriched,
Your rare, outlandish beauty won his heart. [*She holds
up the violin.*]

Where is your ruthless master, he that probed
Your soul and mine down to the tender quick,
Then falsely left us to the selfsame fate?
Away! I cannot bear to look upon you! [*She rises and
goes toward the shrine.*]

Oh, blessèd Mother, pity me this night!
In one short hour dashed from the highest point
Of human joy to lowest depth of grief. [*She takes her
rosary and kneels, but rises after a moment and paces
up and down the room.*]

Rest! Rest! I cannot rest! [*She goes toward the chest
again.*]

There lurks a subtle power about you still,
For evil? Good? I know not. Will you speak? [*She
takes up the violin and passes her hand over the strings.*]
Here, where his hateful hand caressed you oft,

THE NECKEN.

My rude touch you shall feel. [*The strings sound.*]

Saints, what a cry!

As of a far voice wailing down the years,

It shuddered through me! Do you mourn for him?

Peace! Peace! I say! [*She lays down the violin and goes again toward the shrine.*]

I will go breathe one prayer!

[*She kneels, but rises directly.*]

I cannot pray,

So heavily do grief and anger press

Upon my panting heart! I suffocate,

Penned in these narrow walls—I—— [*She opens the window.*]

Hush! That sound!

Whence came it? [*A deep sigh is heard.*]

The sighing as of one in pain. My heart,

That sighed, or rather your complaining voice,

Still whispering in the rafters of the roof? [*She goes to the violin again and touches the strings. They sound, and afterwards a profound sigh is heard once more.*]

Again! Oh, shield me heaven! As if it rose

From the deep bosom of the earth herself! [*She goes to the open window and looks out.*]

Cold and still

She lies, white-shrouded for her burial;

Dead as my love, and o'er her frozen face

The leaden sky shuts like a coffin lid.

Oh! [*Screams.*] Holy Virgin!

VOICE OF NECKEN [*without*].

Hark, ere it shut down

Forever; hark! the voice of one who died

THE NECKEN.

To-night; and all things that are dead, with him
Low-calling from the ground!

TOA

[*Leaves the window, making the sign of the cross.*]

What's to be done?

He stands without! I cannot—dare not, see him
Alone! At night! What if he force his way
In anger to me!

NECKEN.

[*From without.*] Toa, not the cross
Whose empty sign above your fluttering heart
You make, nor suppliant knee, nor pious prayer
To yonder painted image of your god,
Can bar me out: I come to keep our tryst.

TOA.

Our tryst! Begone! Have you no fear, no shame?

NECKEN.

Despair knows none.

TOA.

Oh, leave me, I command you!
Nay, then, I will implore——

NECKEN.

I cannot go;

For still you hold me by one quivering cord,
Which must be snapt asunder, though my life—
Alas—break with it!

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

Then if that be true,
So help me heaven, we'll break it face to face!
The saints protect me! Ave Mary plena [*telling her beads*]
I too dare keep our tryst. [*As she runs to fetch a cloak and
throws it around her head and shoulders, the scene
changes.*]

ACT I.

SCENE III.

[*The outside of the house with the low window of TOA'S
chamber opening toward the wood. Its pines and firs are
covered with snow, and approach very near to the house.
The night is cloudy but not dark. By the window stands
NECKEN wrapped in a long dark cloak; he leans, bare-
headed, against the ledge, which is as high as his breast,
but draws back as TOA appears at the window. The lighted
shrine is seen through the window behind TOA.*]

TOA.

Unquiet spirit,
Still walking up and down and to and fro
Upon our earth, what would you have with me?

NECKEN.

Am I thus grown a shadow to your thought?
You loved me once; have you forgot so soon?
This very night which, listening, hears you speak

THE NECKEN.

Such bitter words heard others from your lips
Fall honey-sweet. My child, be not afraid,
Nor tremble like an aspen in the breath
Of my reproach; though I am beaten down,
Crushed, pelted by the muddy scorn of men,
Still, still, I love you! [*She draws back.*]

Never shrink from me!

I'll fold my longing arms above my heart,
Which cries for you as hungry men for bread,
Nor shall my touch, my word, or look offend
The reverent love I bear you!

TOA.

[*With emotion, half weeping.*] Idle words!
Jan—say no more——

NECKEN.

The little human name
Which I was wont to love, against your will
Slipped softly from your lips.

TOA.

[*Regaining her composure.*] Had I foreseen
That trick of habit, I had strangled first
The breath that uttered it!

NECKEN.

Yet I will plead,
Oh, unjust judge, my cause; weigh then my sin
Well in the scales of mercy; balance it
With my most heavy lot and iron round
Of suffering, before you dare to speak

THE NECKEN.

The "guilty" which, too well I know, your heart
Already has pronounced.

TOA.

Unwilling, I,

Perforce, must hear you, yet be warned, my patience
Wears thin—to very shreds.

NECKEN.

The favorite man,

Placed by our partial Maker on the point
Which tops His vast creation; from that summit
How can his purblind eye and his dull ear
Catch sight and sound of all the beauteous life
Of element, of plant and animal
Thronging its mighty base! But I, who stand
Before you here, grew once with leafy growth
Of tree and shrub, flew in the spark from fire,
Tossed in the white-capped wave, in the loud wind
Passed querulous, or floated in the cloud
Still over summer pastures, or, thick-piling
Cloud upon cloud till high they darkly towered
Above the green and sultry earth, myself
I bowed o'er their far-thundering battlements
In lightning's leap from end to end of heaven:
Such uncouth joy have elemental things!
At last, methought, there dawned a blessèd day
Above all others—now, alas, I know
It was of all my life the day accursed
When, how or whence I know not, music breathed
A vital breath, a pulse of melody
Through this my essence vaporous, diffused,
Which in cold sweat condensing, travail seized

THE NECKEN.

My airy frame, convulsed with dreadful throes;
Born of that liquid death, lo, I became
A spirit!——

TOA.

Fast this tale of yours outruns
My slow belief!——

NECKEN.

And my calm breast was flooded
With the in-rushing tide of hopes and fears,
Of sorrow, rapture, the wild wave of passion,
Such good, such evil, as I had not dreamed.
What though I sat among the sons of earth
A mighty potentate, my power rolling
Along my brooks and rivers, yet I found
No peace within, and 'mid the battle here
[*Laying his hand on his breast.*]
Hard pressed, beseeching eyes to man I lifted!
He holds the secret of Eternal Hope;
To him alone imparted. I drew near,
For all my heart was centered in desire
That, should he reach me forth a brother's hand
To help me in the fight, I following him,
Though stumbling far behind, might storm at last,
Above the prostrate bodies of my sins,
The stronghold of salvation, which, besieging,
No beast nor host of lesser lives may enter.
For this I mingled with the ways of man:
The rest you know. I served him for a year;
Drudged at his menial tasks; but what cared I
When, Toa, my bare life grew all in flower
With love of you, sweet!

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

You have spoken truth ;
Too well I know the rest ! For you, who roamed
God's universe an unhoused vagabond,
You dared to enter thus an honest home,
To slink, a thief, into my open heart
And, muffled in a lie, to filch my love ;
Oh, while you spoke, a shudder through me ran,
That ever I should love man's pale reflection
Glassed in the mocking water ! Nameless thing !
You breath of evil from the pit upwafted ;
You nothing, which rebels against the Highest !
You creature formed of empty fret and foam,
Bound up forever with the babbling brook,
Oh, how I hate—I hate you !

NECKEN.

Dear to me
Beyond your love or hate, whate'er betide,
Forgive me that my heart went forth to you
In ardent sighing ; ravished out of me
By all your grace of look and word and motion :
Forgive, that from my deep wound languishing,
As one with fever parched, who, hour by hour,
Pants for the cooling draught, I longed to still
The ceaseless throb of passion ; that in madness
I dared aspire to fill my bleeding void
Of anguish with your heart ; fear not—'tis over ;
My fever-fit burns out, and through my veins
There creeps the chill of death. Like some wild mountain,
Whose fiery heart, erst wrung with awful pangs,

THE NECKEN.

Heaved all his groaning breast and, breaking, poured
Convulsive forth in gasps of smoke and flame,
Hot lava shuddering upward like a sigh
That fain would pierce with pity his cold heaven,
Listening unmoved high o'er his agony;
Like him, henceforth my thunderings die off
Into the stillness deep as my despair:
And though within the sullen fires will smoulder,
Without I'll bare my scarred breast to the breeze
Of summer, to the little brooks at play,
To cloud and sunshine, to the tender green
Which timidly creeps up my barren clefts,
And all this simple life I'll nourish far,
Far from the haunts of man, for nevermore
His threshold will I cross, or from him brook
The frowning brows, the down-curved mouth of scorn;
My curse upon him! So farewell, my sweet!
My bitter—bitter sweet! I held you once
More close to me than aught in earth or heaven,
And, though your will has snatched you from these arms,
I'll ever hold you dearer far than life!
My first love and my last—my only love
Till all things have an end; farewell! farewell!
Give me my violin, and let me go!

TOA.

[*Starting.*] 'Tis true! Almost I had forgotten it!
I have it still.

NECKEN.

Make haste, and fetch it hither,
For in the sight of your cold loveliness
I suffer—I grow faint! I would be gone

THE NECKEN.

To hide my pain in some dark, forest place
Beneath the moaning pines.

TOA.

I think you said
You loved the fiddle well?

NECKEN.

And wherefore not;
Consoler, friend, whose voice henceforth with mine
Must mourn away the melancholy years?
Haste then, and bring it forth.

TOA.

[Leaves the window, and returns with the violin.]

Behold it, Neck,
And look your last upon it! Mark it well,
And me; this moment quits my debt in full
With my revenge. From you that stole my love
I take this fiddle, lest you should forget
That earthly maids have hearts.

NECKEN.

Is this a time for jesting?

TOA.

I will keep it
To put me oft in mind how wisely once
The waters went a-wooing!

THE NECKEN.

NECKEN.

Do you mock me?

Ah, Toa, what is this?

TOA.

My words were spoken

With truth, each one, and full of my fixed purpose.

NECKEN.

No, no, I'll not believe it! I'll not think

A thought which slanders you!

TOA.

I'll think, and—act.

NECKEN.

[*Groaning.*] Spare me this mortal blow!

TOA.

Shall I in mercy spare the heathen Neck,
Who sought to snare a Christian maid in marriage?
No, no, a thousand times! Back, impious spirit,
Back to your prison-house, the hollow deep,
Where the Creator pens you since the flood!
There may you sit unblessed through centuries,
And watch the shadows of our human life
Move o'er its greenish walls. But I'll not part
With this fair troth-gift from my elfin lover;
For else——

NECKEN.

I will be patient!

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

Who knows: love

Is fickle!

NECKEN.

Let not choler, choking, knot

The muscles of my throat! Let me not weep

A woman's tears!

TOA.

And running toward the sea,

Might float it with the kiss snatched from these lips

To some fair mermaid! Nay, be calm, I pray you!

Perchance!—for said you not that they who suffer,

And they alone, can play—I now have learned

To touch these strings to music. Then, heaven knows,

This night should make me master and supreme;

For I have—suffered!—— [*She falters and begins to sob.*]

NECKEN.

Oh, all ye powers

Of the upper air—if there be such, who sit

To judge this miserable race of men—

When have you seen that love and hate, embracing,

In such unnatural wedlock did beget

A deed so monstrous! They are near—so near

Of kin—so like—ah, Toa, hear me! Pause

Before it be too late! Look well, my child,

Lest in the dim recesses of your heart

You have mistaken love, still lurking there,

Tricked out and flaunting in the madman's dress

Of hate, for him!

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

I will not. Say no more!
Away! Go tell that to your nixie loves;
Perchance they may believe you; and for this!
Get you another fiddle! Fare-you-well!

NECKEN.

Dare you insult me thus?

TOA.

I dare.

NECKEN.

Rash woman!
Wake not the demon slumbering in my breast!

TOA.

Aye, flash him forth in lightning from your eyes!
Roll him in deep-toned thunders through your voice!
I care not!

NECKEN.

[*Drawing nearer to her.*] Mortal, think not to escape
My vengeance; for, as we stand face to face,
Dear shall you pay me for this night! I'll wring
Its every minute back from you, be sure,
In tears, in supplication, terror, torment;
For you have mocked my sufferings with taunts,
With bitter gibes you have despised my love,
You've spit your scorn upon it, flung it back
Full in my face, and now you overwhelm me
With this black wave of wrong, the rest o'erswelling;
You rob me of my own, that music left
Sole consolation of my stricken heart.

THE NECKEN.

Of water part, yet I am part of fire;
Fool, you have set this kindling match to me,
Who will, alight now, blaze myself and you
To dire combustion! Look you, I could leap
This window-ledge and seize you both!

TOA.

[*Drawing back.*] Avaunt!
The blessèd saints, the holy Virgin yonder,
[*Pointing to the shrine.*]
Protect me, for you dare not enter here!
No evil spirit may defile her presence!
I have no fear.

NECKEN.

Now by the earth I swear;
Not all the saints and virgins of your heaven,
Nor all the devils red-hot from your hell,
Shall hold me back from you! The wrong I suffer
Becomes my right to enter. By the law
Of gods and men, I justly, o'er the soul
Which has defrauded me of what is mine,
Have power of life and death.

TOA.

Oh, never!—

NECKEN.

Yet

I will not cleave your falseness to the root
With the sharp stroke of punishment that follows
Swift on the evil done; no, mine shall be
A slow and sweet revenge. When in the spring

THE NECKEN.

Soft languor, like a subtle poison stealing
Delicious through your senses, stamps on each
One hated image only, charming you
Fast to a foe abhorred, when at your touch,
In very truth, at last my violin
Flings wide the vibrant gates of sound and pours
Its music forth, when in that fatal hour
Your hands shall play what, hearing once, the heart
Can ne'er forget, the march that moves the worlds
With solemn step along th' eternal highway;
Then, then my wrongs remember, for that strain,
So weighted with my woe, shall draw you down,
In fear and hatred down, and, link by link,
Its chain of silver notes about you winding,
Deliver you up, soul and body, captive
To these detested arms, which death himself
Shall never burst asunder! Fare-you-well,
Until we meet again: meantime that thought
Both meat and drink shall be to my revenge!

ACT II.

SCENE I.

[The meadow before the house, bordered on three sides by the wood, through which a path runs down to the brook. BRITA and ASTRID are seated at a loom weaving. Time late afternoon. Enter SVEN.]

SVEN.

So, mother, since it is the first of May,
Let maids and men keep merry holiday!
Now—praise God—with the winter at our back,
Our ploughing and our planting we may slack
An hour or two, and so the farmer stops,
Between the winter snows and summer crops,
To breathe awhile; a bit of comfort taste
And pleasure in his life; so mother, haste!
Call in the neighbors, who have faced with us,
Staunch friends, the dark and stormy days, and thus
We'll give a rouse and welcome to the spring.
Not for their use alone each needful thing,
In season due, the good God giveth men,
But for return of thanks and pleasure; then,
Let us be merry!

BRITA.

Father, that is true!
And they'll bestir themselves, I warrant you,
The young ones!

THE NECKEN.

ASTRID.

Master, thanks.

BRITA.

[*To* ASTRID.] Put by the loom.

This meadow makes a green and pleasant room
For fun and frolic. [*Enter* SIGURD.]

SVEN.

Tell me, Sigurd, how—
For you came through the lower wood but now—
Thrive the young trees I planted?

SIGURD.

Yonder brook
Has overflowed them all. The water took—
I waded through—last night the bridge away.
'Tis rising, rising still; since yesterday
It rushes, foaming, with a sullen roar
Between its banks, that widen more and more,
As panting to avenge some bitter wrong,
The angry water hurries thus along!

SVEN.

Tut, man, such fine-spun fancies in the head
Will soon breed others worse. Leave them instead
To poet-fellows, stringing one by one
Their tinkling rhymes together; for the sun,
The worm, the donkey, heart—or stomach-ache;
All's grist to clapper-mills, that verses make.
No more of them! Haste to the field and send

THE NECKEN.

Our men back from their ploughing, while I wend
My way to neighbor Torvald, and invite
His folk and him to step across. [*Exit SVEN and SIGURD.*]

ASTRID.

A fright

Has Sigurd given me! Oh, wherefore should
Our gentle brook thus overflow the wood?
A sudden horror chills me to the bone,
What seeks the creeping water! Stone by stone
We bound the sullen Neck; with muttered prayers
Crippling his magic strength, but, unawares,
With melting ice his winter chain he's burst
Perchance, and walks again; the goblin curst!

BRITA.

"A good man's prayer," we read in Holy Writ,
"Availleth much." Have you no faith in it,
Nor in good woman's neither? Fie, for shame,
Speak nevermore that poor, lost creature's name! [*Enter*
TOA.]

Why, how now, Toa, rosy-checked and fresh
As May herself!

ASTRID.

[*Laughing.*] All ready to enmesh
A dozen hearts and more!

BRITA.

What nonsense, child!
But now, methinks, your look is somewhat wild:
What has befallen you?

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

The wakened beat
Of spring through all my pulses ; in my feet
The dancing joy of blossoms in the wind,
For now I open with each flower kind
My being to the sun, and my cheek feels
The warm blood flush it like the sap that steals
From glad earth upward, reddening through the bark
Of slender, chanting pines. All night—oh hark!
It swells and dies away—the murmur clear
Of many waters, calling in my ear ;
Low, liquid laughters mocking my unrest!

ASTRID.

Of waters, ah!—

TOA.

And longing in my breast
Still waxes night by night ; a crescent moon
That never wanes, until my senses swoon
With languor sweet away in soft-armed dreams,
Wherein a mighty river alway seems
To bear me—whither? Thus my longing grows
For what? Alas, I know not!

BRITA.

Humph! Who knows!
For youth's fine fever, heated by the spring—
Though I am old, yet have I felt the thing—
Burns out, my girl, in the first hearty kiss
Given by an honest husband. Heed not this!

THE NECKEN.

ASTRID.

'Tis passing strange!

BRITA.

Strange, Astrid, fiddlestick!

Look, yonder come the neighbors! Girls, be quick!

Fetch out some chairs: my cronies are—alas—

Like me, too stiff to sit upon the grass. [*She goes forward to welcome her friends.*]

ASTRID.

[*To TOA.*] Ill I forebode! Above your head, I fear,
Some dark misfortune gathers!

TOA.

No, my dear.

Come, with a smile now let me round your face,

Which lengthens so. Look on this little space,

Where leaves with sun and shadow are at play,

And sweet birds sing their joyous roundelay

To the gay flowers, dancing to and fro

With wanton breezes, as they come and go

Lightfooted o'er the grass of emerald green;

A fairer hall than this was never seen

In the new-garnished house of spring! You search

For evil days to come when yonder birch

Sways softly to the music of the pine;

Each solemn fir is decked with tassels fine,

Their garlands wave the branches of the larch,

While high above us blue the heavens arch

Their bridge, o'er which cloud follows cloud like sheep,

Westward to far, green pastures in the deep?

THE NECKEN.

Be merry then! I feel the sovereign day
Of my whole life will be this first of May!

[*Exeunt TOA and ASTRID. They reënter with LENNART and SIGURD bringing chairs. INGA follows them. BRITA goes forward to greet the peasants: men, women and children, who enter with SVEN. The younger ones group themselves about ASTRID and TOA, talking.*]

BRITA.

Good friends, you are right welcome!

SVEN.

That they are!

[*To an old woman.*]

'Tis many months since you have walked so far,
I'll wager, mother Svanhild! Sit you here.
A mug of home-brewed, Inga, foaming clear,
To freshen her a bit.

SVANHILD.

I thank you, Sven.

I'll rest my weary bones awhile, and then
Together of the good, old time we'll chat;
These young ones can't remember.

SVEN.

True.

FIRST WOMAN.

Is that

Indeed your daughter, Brita, grown so tall?

SECOND WOMAN.

A comely maiden!

THE NECKEN.

THIRD WOMAN.

Yes.

SVEN.

These people all
Are thirsty! Inga! Astrid! Toa! Cease
Your gossip, girls!

LENNART.

My tongue cleaves to my——

INGA.

Peace!

They're never filled with food and drink, these men!
But still they cry for more!

TORVALD.

The season, Sven,
Is forward for the plowing. Your big field
You've planted all with wheat, eh? Will it yield,
Think you, the last year's crop?

SVEN.

I hope so.

CHILD.

Cake!

Please, one more cake!

THIRD WOMAN.

No, greedy!

BRITA.

Let her take

Another bit, poor child!

THE NECKEN.

THIRD WOMAN.

[*Giving the child cake.*] So!

BRITA.

Have you heard
She has another grandson?

FOURTH WOMAN.

Not a word!
We live so far from town, next week the news
Will come our way belated. Did she use
The midwife from our village?

THIRD WOMAN.

Into fits
That woman frightens me! They say, her wits
She loses at hard labor.

ASTRID.

[*Coming forward with the young group.*]
You were wed
I dreamed last night to Inga, Lennart.

FIRST YOUTH.

Red
He grows up to his hair!

SECOND YOUTH.

Poor Lennart!

LENNART.

Nay!

THE NECKEN.

THIRD YOUTH.

Deep will we pledge you on the wedding day!

FIRST MAIDEN.

Will you invite us, Inga? Do!

INGA.

Now hold

Your silly tongues, which somewhat overbold
Make free with my good name! No man in town
Would I be fool enough to wed!

SECOND MAIDEN.

Your gown

Is new? A pretty color!

FIRST MAIDEN.

At the fair

I bought it.

THIRD MAIDEN.

What ails Toa? Standing there

Alone, apart from all the rest! As still
As church in sermon-time; say what you will!

ASTRID.

'Tis nothing; let her be!

THIRD MAIDEN.

They hover near;

The bashful boys, and whisper in her ear
Their foolery in vain, she pays no heed;

THE NECKEN.

Her blue, unseeing eyes smile on indeed,
As at some lover——

FOURTH MAIDEN.

Hush! If in her sleep
She walks and talks, behind her I will creep;
I warrant you, I'll rouse her from her trance!
Wake, [*creeps up behind* TOA] wake! Oh, Toa mine!

TOA.

[*Starting from her reverie.*] A dance! a dance!

VOICES.

Aye, aye, the very thing!

MEN.

A dance!

FIRST MAIDEN.

Alas!

We have no music, else upon this grass,
Short, smooth, we'd foot it finely!

FIRST YOUTH.

Is there none

Who has a fiddle here?

TOA.

[*Slowly, as if awaking from sleep.*]

Ah! There is one!

Now I remember—I—a moment wait,
And I will fetch it.

THE NECKEN.

VOICES.

Go! [*Exit TOA.*]

FOURTH WOMAN.

'Tis growing late;

We must be on our way.

BRITA.

[*Waking up.*] What is't they do?

LENNART.

[*To INGA.*] Will you dance, Inga?

INGA.

[*Accepting his arm.*] Are you crazy, too?

SECOND WOMAN.

The young folks are for dancing.

SECOND MAIDEN.

[*To ASTRID aside.*] Astrid, pray
Why do you blush when Sigurd looks your way?
Oh, never fear, he'll ask you.

ASTRID.

[*Boxing her ear.*] Peace!

SVEN.

That's right;
Young fellows, to it! Dance out half the night!

THE NECKEN.

We've pretty girls in plenty! [To FOURTH WOMAN.]

Do not go!

[Enter TOA with the violin.]

How now, a fiddle, child?

THIRD WOMAN.

I did not know

Your daughter played, good Brita?

BRITA.

[To ASTRID.] Tell me where

She found that fiddle, Astrid? Will she dare

To play upon it, when she cannot name

A single note of music?

ASTRID.

Whence it came

I know not, but I know i' the very nick

Of time it comes for dancing.

TOA.

[Placing herself at the end of the meadow next the house.]

Choose, for the dance begins!

[She appears to sink again into reverie. There is a pause, all looking at her.]

BRITA.

That fiddle odd

I've seen before—somewhere——

FIRST WOMAN.

Begins to nod

Old mother Svanhild——

THE NECKEN.

FOURTH WOMAN.

Hush!

[TOA begins, playing softly at first; they begin to dance.]

TORVALD.

Oho, my friend,

Your daughter has the gift!

BRITA.

[Low.]

Now heaven send

This be not what I fear!

SVEN.

I never yet

Have seen her play the fiddle!

TORVALD.

She will set

My crippled leg to dancing soon!

YOUTHS.

[Stamping their feet and clapping their hands.] Yuhè!

[Music grows more animated, and TOA becomes more and more absorbed by it.]

CHILD.

Oh, mother, I must join the dancing!

THIRD WOMAN.

Stay!

[Child catches the dog by his forepaws as he comes running in, and whirls around with him.]

THE NECKEN.

CHILD.

The dog shall be my partner!
[*The Music and dancing grow wilder.*]

FIRST WOMAN.

[*To SECOND WOMAN.*] Let us try!
I never heard such fiddling!

SECOND WOMAN.

No, nor I!
[*They dance. A top spins across the stage.*]

SVANHILD.

[*In her sleep.*] The elfin music, hark! Th' eleventh change
Sets all the world a-dancing!

THIRD WOMAN.

This is strange!
[*Music and dancing grow wilder still; TOA sways with it.*]
Oh, I can sit no longer; I must beat
The magic measure out!

FOURTH WOMAN.

My twitching feet
Waltz me unwilling to the dance!
[*They dance.*]

BRITA.

[*Rushing forward.*] Away
Cast that accursèd fiddle, child!

THE NECKEN.

YOUTHS.

[*Stamping their feet and clapping their hands.*] Yuhè!
[*Old men and women join in the dancing as the music grows wilder still.*]

TOA.

Fast I am bound; I cannot!

SVANHILD.

[*In her sleep.*] Oh, beware
That old, bewitching strain!

BRITA.

Bound! Oh, despair!

SVEN.

[*Striding forward.*]
You shall not disobey me, Toa, drop
That bow of evil omen!

VOICES.

Stop, oh, stop!
[*A cart-wheel rolls across the stage.*]

TOA.

[*With rapture.*] Swayed by the melody as in a boat,
On toward the master stream I float, I float!—

SVANHILD.

[*In her sleep.*] The charm is working, working, welladay!

TOA.

Swift by the rushing music borne—

THE NECKEN.

YOUTHS.

[*Stamping their feet and clapping their hands wildly.*]

Yuhè!

[*Pans, chairs, tables, etc., roll across the stage.*]

TOA.

On, on, although the thunder of the fall

Grows in mine ears, yet when the waters call——

VOICE.

She's mad! With rolling beat of muffled drum——

VOICES.

The music marches now!

TOA.

[*In ecstasy.*]

I come, I come!

[*The music changes to a march as she goes out. The curtain falls on all dancing.*]

ACT II.

SCENE 2.

SCENE: The brook, overhung by trees, through which shine the crescent moon and evening star, while the glow of sunset still lingers in the west. A flight of stone steps with a seat halfway down leads to the water. Beside the brook, on a rock partly in the water, is seen the figure of NECKEN dim in the dusk; he is clad in gleaming scales. There is a long pause. NECKEN lifts his head and listens. No sound is audible. Pause; he listens again.

THE NECKEN.

NECKEN.

Hoho, a sound!
The sound of music wafted from afar,
Which I have longed to hear!

[*He listens again.*]

At last! I wait;

Day after day crawls on here to the week,
The slowly rounding month, my vengeful purpose
With my deep patience swelling!

[*He listens again; a faint sound of music is now heard.*]

Patience, ebb,

Now ebb away; the clock of time has struck
Mine hour!

[*The music grows louder.*]

Again that music! Haughty man,

You would not suffer my imploring eyes
To read life's time-worn book, whose crabbed text
Hides, locked within its ancient characters
By some primeval hand, th' Eternal Hope.
Instead, well, did you ground me, damnably,
In all the biting comment which your act
Scores on its yellowing leaf! For this, be sure,
I deeply now will plunge myself and you
In mingled love and hate!

[*The music grows louder, and TOA appears at the entrance
of the wood. She advances, still playing the violin.*]

Herself, by all the witchery of Spring!
Oh, Spring, and Music both, I thank ye, Powers,
That you have caught the maiden in your snare!
Fat sacrifice I'll offer; finny firstlings
Of all my streams and rivers!

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

[*Calling.*] Open, love!

NECKEN.

[*Half raising himself from the brook.*]

Who comes a-knocking at the Necken's door?

TOA.

[*She stops playing and stands at the top of the steps, holding her bow and violin in her left hand, her right outstretched as if groping. The music continues very low. She speaks as if in her sleep.*]

I, Toa.

NECKEN.

Toa! In the name of wonder,
Whom seek you here?

TOA.

[*As before.*] My Necken-love.

NECKEN.

For shame!

Do man's fair daughters lightly come a-wooing
The sons of gods?

TOA.

I pray you open, love!

NECKEN.

Who talks of love! What, will you beg a kiss
Of "heathen Neck," "Man's pale reflection?" Such
You called me once when you despised my love.
I hurl now back at you your words of scorn:
I well remember them, though but the ghost

THE NECKEN.

Of mighty floods, or—lower, when I choose
To play the brute; as now!——

[*He takes the form of a white horse leaping out of the
brook, then resumes his own shape.*]

Ha! will you go!

I must be merry; for—ha! ha!—you tickle
My churlish humor! Let me laugh awhile!
For what have I to do with love-sick maids!
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!

[*Throwing his head back and laughing.*]

Mine eyes run o'er with laughter!

[*TOA begins to descend the steps, her violin still playing
softly.*]

Ye gods! Look where she comes!

TOA.

I, Toa——

NECKEN.

[*Softly.*] Toa——

TOA.

Pardon, I implore!

Love, open wide those arms——

NECKEN.

To take you in?

[*He springs up the steps with outstretched arms, but pauses
in the act of clasping her. He speak very softly.*]

You, Toa?

TOA.

[*Dreamily as before.*] Toa.

THE NECKEN.

NECKEN.

[*Throwing his arms round her.*]

Now, by Mother Earth,
Mine, soul and body—said I not—forever!
I, kissing, seal you here, and here, and here!
Mine, mine this braided wealth of yellow hair,
Silken as flax; these eyes of blue, whose fire,
Caught from mine own at last, the drooping lids
Would hide from me, and this fair cheek that burns
With quickened blood at pressure of my lips,
The sweet mouth, tremulous, and yielding me
Now kiss for kiss, the brow, the neck of snow,
And bosom heaving mutinous with sighs,
Where pants the heart for love, my love, at last;
Of all this tender round of you which frames
Your maiden soul I'm master; and of that,
Aye, by the gods, of that! Ah, I have lived
A thousand years of longing in each hour
These miserable months! But you shall make
Amends for all, and grant me bliss, such bliss
As baffles time to measure out in years!
Back, ripple back, ye panels of my door!
My sweetheart, enter in! Down, down with me
Sink to my crystal hall, where I will cool
My passion fierce as hate.

[*With his arm about her he leads her down slowly, step by step. She leans on him, holding the violin and bow in one hand; the violin still sounding.*]

Aye, you shall mingle
With all my element; as soft the cloud
Melts into rain, I, clinging drop by drop,

THE NECKEN.

Will kiss away in cold, delicious death
The mortal maid who dared the Necken's love.

TOA.

[*Descending the first of the last three steps, pauses.*]

Oh, love, behold,
How the water cold,
Reaching up its arm so green,
Fain would clutch me! Do I lean
On that arm? A shudder sweeps
Over me!

NECKEN.

The water keeps
What it catches; down!

TOA.

[*On the next step.*] Woe, woe,
Woe is me!
For now I see
With opened eyes
Beneath the bank
Of grasses dank,
Despite the gloom——

NECKEN.

[*Ironically.*] Oh, fair surprise!

TOA.

The nuptial room,
Rounded by a water-drop——

NECKEN.

[*Laughs mockingly.*]
No, by a trembling woman's tear.

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

And mirrored in its glassy top—

NECKEN.

[*Mocking.*] Shall love's sweet pleasure be, my dear.

TOA.

That bending tree——

NECKEN.

Let be, let be!

TOA.

The lonely star of eve shines through;
And broken through its moving walls——

NECKEN.

Delay no longer!

TOA.

Moonlight falls:

There, Necken, must I dwell with you
Forever? Nay!

NECKEN.

[*Trying to draw her down to the last step.*]
Give o'er, give o'er
This vain entreaty!

TOA.

[*Wildly.*] Nevermore
Gather with me in the sun
My beloved, one by one
At the church on Sunday morn,
When across the fields is borne

THE NECKEN.

The clear church-bell,
To prayer, to prayer
Calling, I shall list——

NECKEN.

Forbear !

TOA.

While I weep below,
Evermore that Christian bell
Rolling, tolling like a knell,
Tolling down
From the praying town ;
But nevermore
Thither shall I go !

NECKEN.

I charge you, wailing woman, have a care !
I am no patient bridegroom waiting here
At your caprice ; the cold and sluggish blood
Of men this is not, racing through my veins,
And, if you with my demon passion play,
Straight will I turn and rend you ! Come then, come,
My sweet, my life, come down, or else I swear
That I will snatch you in my amorous arms
And leap with you in the up-splashing stream !

TOA.

[*Wringing her hands.*]
I shall hear them pray
Yonder in the town
For a soul in sin.
[*The Necken starts.*]
Faintly down and down,

THE NECKEN.

Hark, the prayer is rung!
From your iron tongue,
Passing-bell; you toll
For a dying soul;
Be the masses said,
For a soul is dead—

NECKEN.

My heaven—my hell——

TOA.

In my wedding gown.

NECKEN.

I grasp you, cease!

TOA.

As I moan within,
I shall hear them pray.

NECKEN.

[*Turning aside.*] What care I for sin;
A spirit damned forever! [*He laughs harshly.*]

TOA.

Oh, release

My struggling soul!

NECKEN.

I cannot! Hold your peace!

TOA.

Be merciful! You will not wrong me so;
To drag my spotless soul with yours below,
Sin-blackened, lost!

THE NECKEN.

NECKEN.

Now, in an angry sea
Of doubt I toss!—I sink!—I——

TOA.

Pity me!

NECKEN.

[*Covering his averted face with his hands.*]
Drown with my wrecked revenge? Shall I?—

TOA.

Relent!

There yet is fleeting time! Kind Neck, repent,
And let me go! [*Pause.*]

NECKEN.

Toa, entreat no more! My heart you wring! [*Pause.*]
Though I be damned, I will not do this thing!
Though I be lost in sin, I'll not ensnare
Another, but alone my torment bear!

[*Seizes the old scythe hanging at his belt.*

Smite, iron, thou of old the penance stern,
That salved the smarting breast; smite, shattering
This pagan spell of sense!

[*He breaks the strings of the violin. The music stops.*

TOA gives a cry, and covers her face with her hands,
reeling. He catches her in his arms and drags her back
from the water, placing her on the seat. *Pause.*]

THE NECKEN.

NECKEN.

Look up! The storm is over! Toa, calm
Your shaking fear!

TOA.

[Uncovers her eyes and looks around.]

Alas! Where am I? Whither
Oh, wild ones, am I hurried? In mine ears
The rising waters roar, about me flinging
Their supple arms, strong as the dappled snake,
They drag me down! The leap!—the depth below!
The ghastly sights!—Ah, no, no, in your face
I read the truth: you; it was you alone
That drew me down! You fought against my soul
And strove to wrest it from the Heavenly Powers,
Hurling it to perdition with yourself.
But now—though trembling still, I scarce believe it—
Your brow is clear from that black cloud of anger
Whence flashed, more dreadful in its lurid play—
Heaven pity you!—a passion wild and strange.
Now melts your look to gentleness and pity;
By good triumphant, now you set your foot
Firm on your evil self, and thus you stand
For this proud moment high as man himself!
Spirit of Nature, from her outer dark,
Where you must wail forever, you have given
My soul back to the light! Though heaven be shut
To you; once more to me, you open mine!
I thank you from my heart, whose every beat
Henceforth shall whisper gratitude to you!
But you——

THE NECKEN.

NECKEN.

Enough, my Toa, you are safe.

No more up-flaring horror in your eyes
Shall scorch me to the soul; nay, I have none,
Caught in the raging whirlpool of my passion,
Sucked down to sin! But now wells up once more
My level mind; and creeping to your feet—
The little feet, which wandered to my door—
Bedews them humbly with repentant tears
In token of farewell; for here we part
Forever. Earthly maid, who loved me not,
Whom I have loved so well, so tenderly,
And shall with every wave, with every ripple,
Till rivers run no more, adieu! adieu!
For in this hour austere, heroic grown,
Love conquers passion, and I mount, I mount,
Perchance, above my pain to higher things:
Uprooted from my life, I cast you now
Back to the world that scorned me; I, henceforth,
With music make my solitary home
Along the willow-fringed river-banks;
There man shall hear me playing, if he chance,
Late on some melancholy, autumn eve,
To light upon me, sitting pensive there
In a pale blessedness, as of the moon,
Cold, cold, yet sweet, for also they are blessed
Who touch the clear-vibrating strings to joy,
Or the wild plaint of grief.

[*Cries are heard in the distance.*]

They call—they seek you!

Fair child of man—nay, mine you are—ye gods,

THE NECKEN.

That I must yield you up! Yet there is something,
I scarcely know if it be love, commands,
And I obey. I dare not kiss the lips
Which I profaned! Dear maid, my sweetheart once,
Adieu!

[*Figures are seen advancing from a distance. The NECKEN takes up his violin and steps down to the river, but stops on the last step, and turns toward TOA.*]

Behold—the lightning of a sudden thought,
Sent flashing through my brain, illuminates
My blind and groping sorrow: can it be,
That I, the lost, may enter through this gate,
Which opens like a star, set tremulous,
In the dark night of loss? For I have loved,
Have suffered—sacrificed! If I be saved——
And this strange rapture singing through my grief
Would seem to tell me so—I know not, I,
Nor shall know, but I live henceforth in hope.

[*As he sinks into the stream, enter BRITA, ASTRID and INGA calling.*]

TOA.

[*Stretching out her arms toward the water.*]
Stay!——

ASTRID.

Toa! The saints be praised! We find you here!
Long have we sought for you!

BRITA.

[*Hurrying down the steps to TOA, who has remained sitting on the stone seat.*]

My child! Unharméd!

[*Enter SVEN, SIGURD, LENNART and the other peasants.*]

THE NECKEN.

TOA.

[Passing her hand over her eyes as if dazed.]

Oh, mother, mother, I have slept and dreamed
A thing so terrible, so wondrous sweet,
That, as it grew, methought I should have breathed
My life out with the vision, but, alas!—
And I must bear this, mother, till I die—
Love bowed his strength remorseful at my feet
In anguished tears, and, troubling my young heart,
Was gone, as swiftly fled the waking dream.







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